

NNPS ANNUAL REPORT

Solving for X: Unknowns and Possibilities of School, Family, and Community Partnerships during COVID-19

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District and School 2020 UPDATE Data
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NNPS Annual Report: District and School *UPDATE* Data

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It was a year of unknowns and—then—a year of possibilities. From August to February, the 2019-20 school year proceeded as expected—like all prior years. District leaders for partnerships in NNPS guided their schools' Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) to implement their plans and activities to strengthen family and community engagement. Then in March 2020, COVID-19 changed everything. School doors closed and, overnight, life changed for teachers, students, families, and communities. Yet, teachers kept teaching. Parents kept parenting. The goal was to help students keep learning from home. Teachers and families were instantly and explicitly recognized as essential partners in their children's education.

In the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) at Johns Hopkins University, our mission did not change. We aim to help schools use research-based approaches to strengthen school and family connections and improve results for students. However, COVID-19 increased the importance of engaging *all* families to ensure the education of *all* students. This is always a challenge, but it is even more difficult when students are learning from home. We wanted to know if, how, and how well districts and schools in NNPS were responding to COVID-19 challenges to strengthen and sustain their partnership plans and practices.

We designed the *2020 UPDATE* evaluation at the end of the 2019-20 school year to identify some unknowns and solutions—as in an algebraic equation. We asked district leaders for partnerships and school ATPs how well they responded to the challenges of remote teaching, connections with students, and communications with families due to COVID-19 closures. This report summarizes the results of analyses of the *2020 UPDATE* data from NNPS districts and schools.

PART 1. *UPDATE* DATA: DISTRICTS AND SCHOOLS IN NNPS

DISTRICT DEMOGRAPHICS

Fifteen district leaders for partnerships in highly diverse communities in eight states provided data on their work and progress in the 2019-20 school year.¹

- The districts in NNPS were located in central cities (39%), small cities (15%), suburban (15%), and rural (31%) areas. The districts varied in size with enrollments from 1,600 to over 54,000 students.
- Districts in this sample had been members of NNPS for from 1 to 23 years. All districts join NNPS to learn about research-based approaches to partnership program development and how to help schools continually improve their programs of family and community engagement.

- District leaders in this sample facilitated over 300 schools in the 19-20 school year. The districts served populations of students and families who spoke from 3 to about 150 languages and dialects at home, with an average of 45 languages spoken by students and their families across districts. On average, about 15% of students were English Language Learners (ELL), ranging from under 1% to 55% of students in the sample districts.
- On average, about 63% of students were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, ranging from 29% to 100% of students across districts.
- District leaders estimated that their schools conducted engagement activities with over 60,000 families in 19-20.
- Most leaders (93%) expected to continue in their positions in 2020-21. This kind of stability of leaders is important for the continuous progress of the district and its schools (Epstein, Galindo, & Sheldon, 2011).

SCHOOL DEMOGRAPHICS

Just over 300 school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) participated in the 2020 *UPDATE* evaluation. They were located in highly diverse communities in 10 states.¹ The sample included 63 preschools, 157 elementary schools; 42 middle schools, and 34 high schools. A few schools (7) combined these grade spans or omitted the information. In this report we summarize data for Elementary Schools (preschool and elementary grades) and Secondary Schools (middle and high schools).

- Schools were located in central cities (35%), small cities (30%), suburban (17%), and rural (18%) areas.
- All schools reported that they had Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) of teachers, parents, principal, and others who worked together to strengthen the school’s program of family and community engagement. At the high school level, students serve on the ATP.
- Schools included students and families who spoke from 1 to 29 languages and dialects at home, with an average of 3 languages spoken by students and their families. On average, about 15% of students were English Language Learners (ELL) across schools.
- On average, about 82% of students in these schools were eligible for free or reduced-price meals, ranging from 0% to 100% of students across schools.

Summary. Districts and schools in NNPS serve socioeconomically, culturally, racially, linguistically, and geographically diverse students, families, and communities. Some members of NNPS have been working to improve their partnership programs for many years. Others are just starting to use research-based approaches to organize and strengthen family and community engagement. The diversity of districts and schools in this sample permits us to analyze whether the quality of partnership programs affects the nature and extent of outreach to families and responses from families. In other publications, we report results of family and community engagement for students (Epstein & Sheldon, 2016; Sheldon, 2005, 2007, 2019).

QUALITY OF PARTNERSHIP PROGRAMS

Partnership Program Quality: As in prior years, each district and school in NNPS painted a “portrait” of the status and progress of its partnership program on a continuum from just starting (e.g., mainly new and recent members), to good, very good, and excellent.

District Data

Figure 1 reports the *Overall Quality* of district partnership programs. Just over 20% of districts were just starting to develop their plans and programs of family and community engagement. About 20% reported a good program, and equal percentages (29%) reported very good or excellent programs. An “excellent” rating means that the district leaders believe that their partnership programs at the district and school levels would continue “even if district leaders changed.” This kind of sustainability of partnership programs is the ultimate goal in NNPS for all districts and schools. It requires consistent attention and continuous improvement over time.

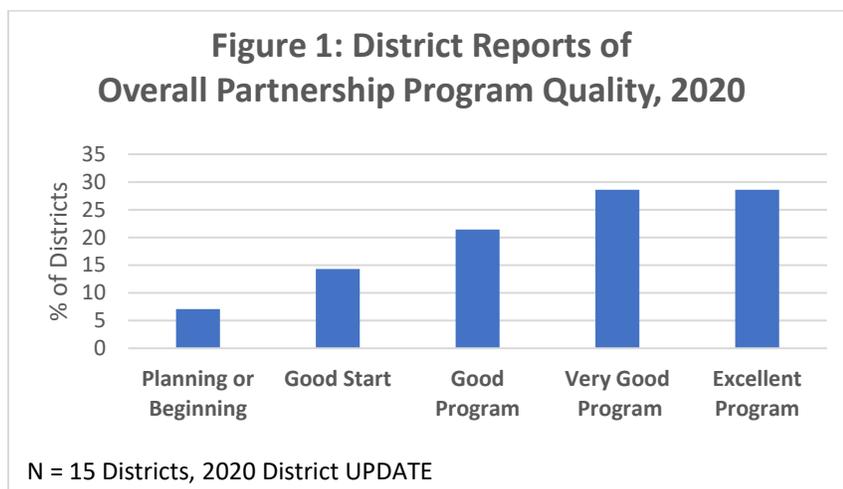
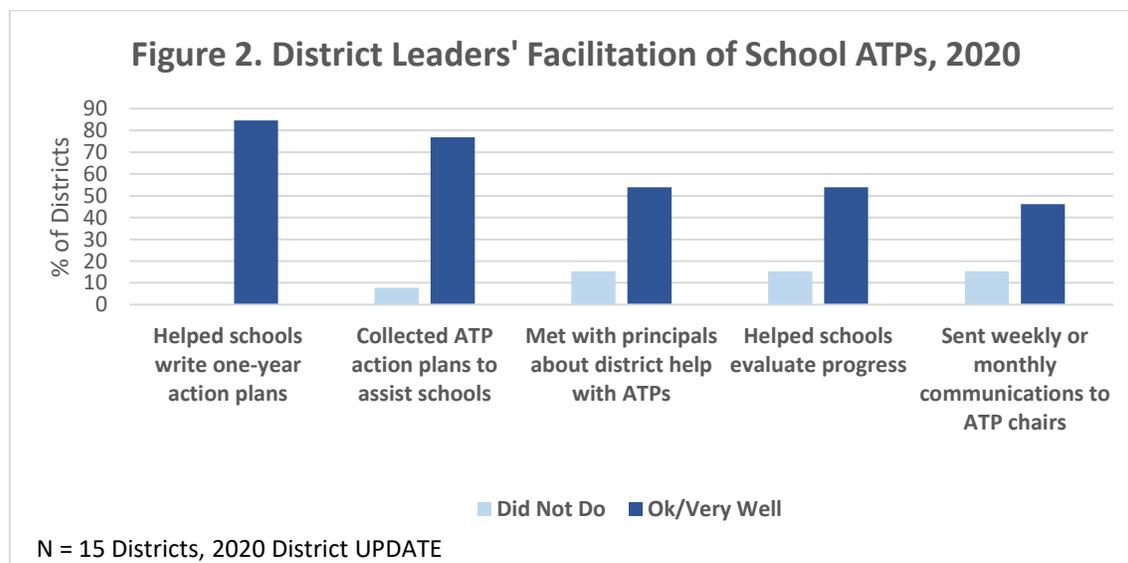


Figure 2 explores an important aspect of district leadership—*facilitation of school ATPs*. This 9-item scale ($\alpha = .90$)² measures how actively district leaders guide school teams (i.e., ranging from did not do, need to improve, OK, to very well). Over 85% of district leaders in NNPS reported they did OK or very well in helping school Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) write their *One-Year Action Plans for Partnerships* for the 19-20 school year. Most leaders (77%) collected schools’ plans to keep track of and assist ATPs’ work and progress. By contrast, fewer than half (46%) of district leaders reported that they communicated weekly or monthly with ATP chairs. This may reflect communication challenges that were addressed slowly after COVID-19 closed school doors.



School Data

ATPs in elementary and secondary schools in NNPS provided a “portrait” of the *Overall Quality* of their partnership programs, as shown in Figure 3. More elementary schools reported very good or excellent programs than did secondary schools (51% vs. 25%, respectively). More secondary schools were just starting or had fair/average programs than elementary schools (52% vs. 18%, respectively). It is important to note that some elementary and some secondary schools were represented across ratings from just starting to excellent programs. Their responses created a near-normal curve, as in prior years. This pattern prevails because at any point in time, some schools just joined NNPS, some have worked over time, and some schools have strong district leaders that guide them to continually improve their programs.

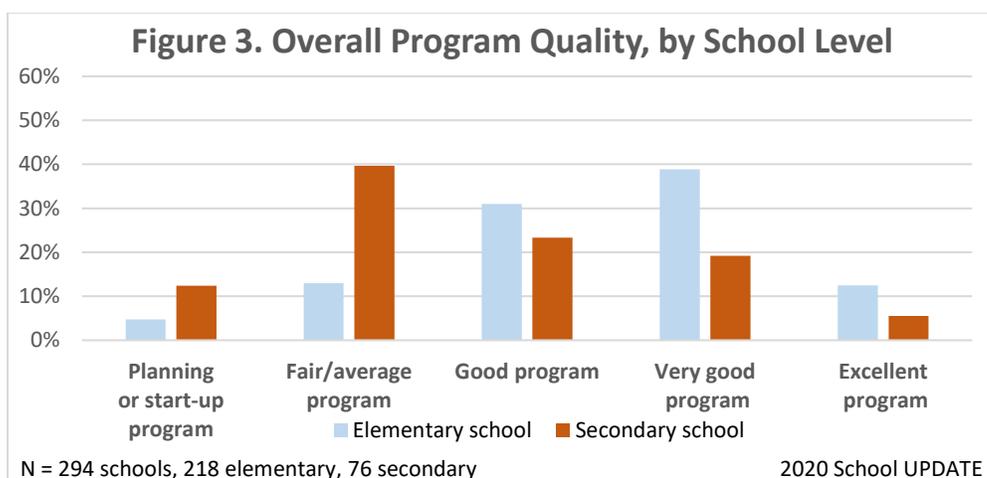
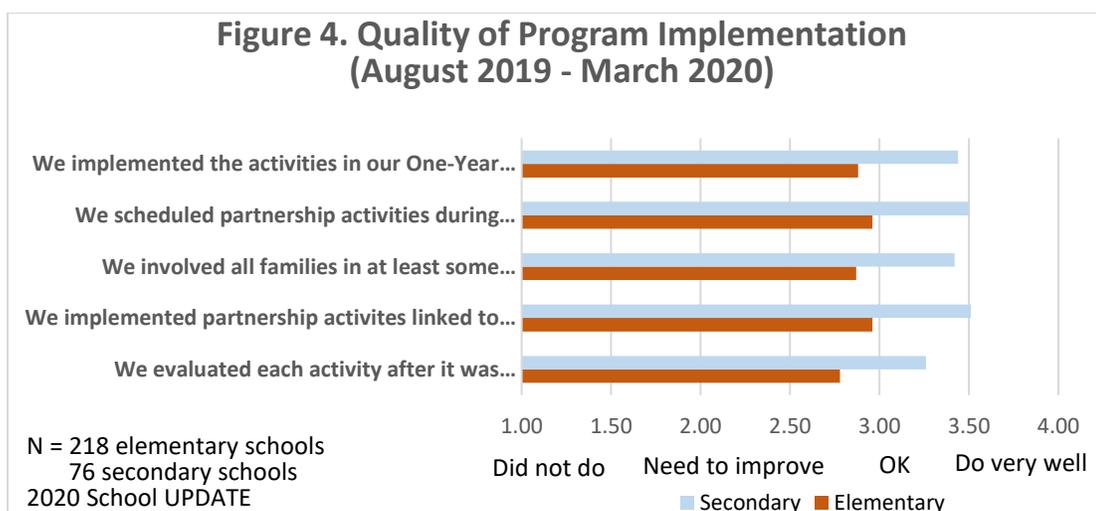


Figure 4 features a few major implementation activities of school-based partnership programs. This year’s measure of *Implementation* is a 5-item scale ($\alpha = .87$) of how well the ATP implemented and evaluated planned partnership activities in the 2019-20 school year. Responses (scored 1-4) ranged from did not conduct, need to improve, doing OK, to doing very well on the implementation activities. Figure 4 reports the average scores for elementary and secondary schools on these items. Elementary schools averaged between doing OK and doing very well on these implementation activities. Secondary schools averaged between need to improve and doing OK, as they developed their partnership programs. In NNPS, even schools that are doing very well in the 19-20 school year are expected to continue to improve the quality of their plans, outreach to families, and evaluations of program quality in the next school year.



PART 2. Special Topic 2020

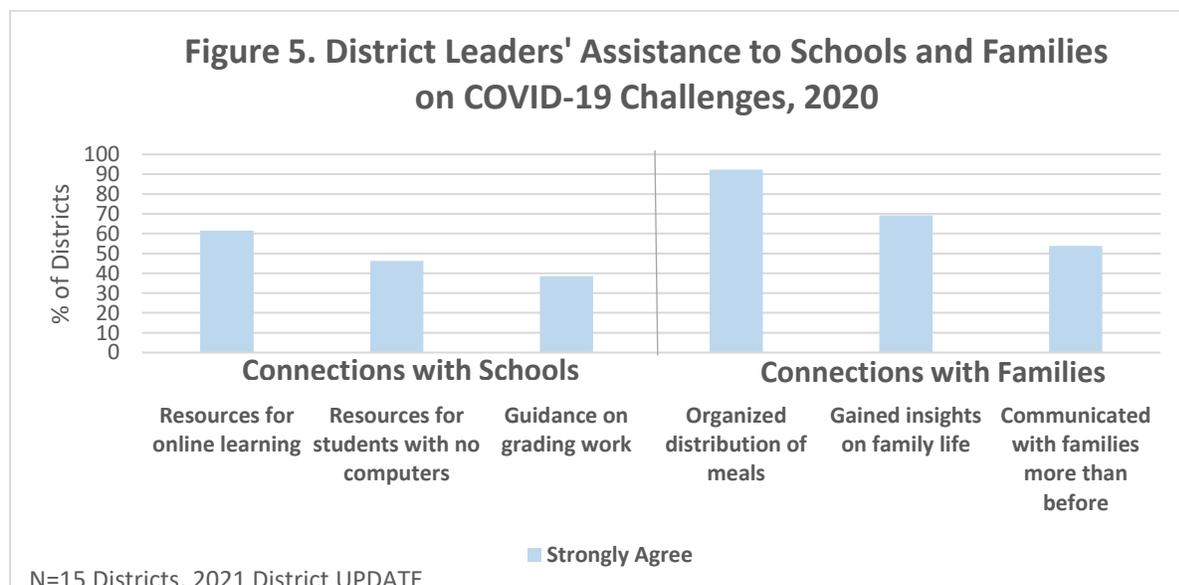
How are NNPS Districts and Schools Responding to COVID-19 Challenges for Partnerships?

DISTRICT DATA

Districts in this sample closed doors in March 2020 in response to COVID-19. All but 3 remained closed through the end of the 19-20 school year. We asked district leaders for partnerships three sets of questions about their work with schools and families. One scale, *District Assistance to Schools*, is a 4-item measure ($\alpha = .76$) that asked district leaders how well they guided teachers on remote teaching, grading, and teamwork. *District Connections with Families* is a 3-item scale ($\alpha = .61$) about communications with families about free meals for students and COVID-19 challenges. *District Evaluation of School Responses* ($\alpha = .88$) is a 5-item measure of district leaders' ratings of how their schools responded to COVID-19 requirements.

Figure 5 reports the percentages of district leaders who strongly agreed with the items of interest. Panel 1-Connections with Schools indicates that about 62% of district leaders reported that they provided school ATPs and teachers with resources for online teaching. Nearly half of the district leaders (46%) addressed the serious challenge of effectively reaching and teaching students who had no computers or Internet access at home. Only 39% of district leaders guided teachers on how to collect and grade students' work. Some district leaders may have viewed grading as the responsibility of each school, because students' assignments vary by grade level, units of work, and by student and parent characteristics and available technologies.

Panel 2-Connections with Families reveals that just about all district leaders (92%) strongly agreed that their district took responsibility to organize the distribution of free meals (i.e., breakfasts and lunches) for eligible students. This was the first and most imperative action when school doors closed. Most district leaders (69%) reported that they gained new insights into the lives of students and families due to the demands and challenges of COVID-19. Over half (54%) of district leaders strongly agreed that they communicated directly with families more during COVID-19 than when schools were open. District leaders' new understanding of family conditions may have positive long-term consequences as COVID-19 continues and when school doors open.

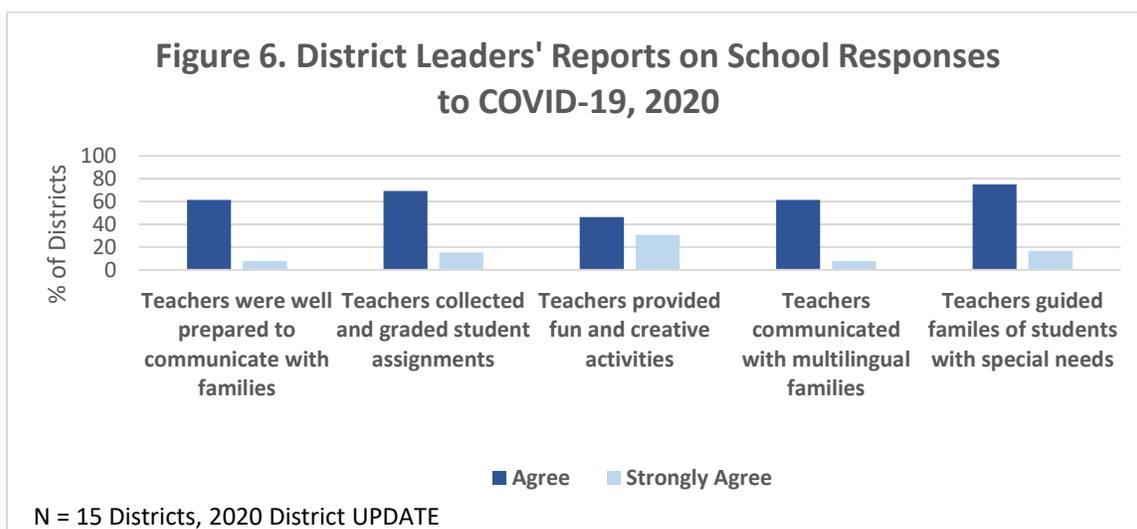


It should be noted that just about all district leaders (85%-100%) agreed or strongly agreed that they guided teachers and contacted families on all items. Because one leader’s “agree” may be equivalent to another leader’s “strongly agree,” we do not want to make too much of small differences in these percentages. It is clear, however, that just about all district leaders in NNPS were working under unprecedented and difficult conditions to assist teachers with their remote teaching tasks, and to communicate with families so help them support their children’s learning from home.

The data also reveal details about the recognized problem of a digital divide. About half of the district leaders (54%) reported that most students in the district had computers and internet access needed to attend and participate in online classes. The same leaders estimated that up to 25% of students did not have these resources. Other district leaders reported more serious discrepancies in technology, with up to 50% of students without computers or adequate internet access. Two districts reported that up to 75% of their students were unable to attend online classes. District leaders noted that they provided resources for teachers to develop weekly or bi-weekly paper-based packets of lessons and assignments for students who could not attend online classes. Paper packets of lessons are weak solutions to the problem of the digital divide that prevented students from attending online classes. These students did not have daily contact with their teachers and other students.

Other analyses (not in Figure 5) revealed that only about half of the district leaders contacted their schools’ ATPs on a regular schedule after COVID-19 closed school doors. District leaders must correct this gap in communications with school ATPs. In NNPS, district leaders for partnerships are expected to communicate with ATP chairpersons weekly or bi-weekly. This helps ATPs know that their district leaders for partnerships are interested in their work and progress, and that the district leaders are ready and able to assist ATPs to improve their partnership programs.

Figure 6 shows that district leaders varied in their evaluations of the quality of their schools’ responses to COVID-19. About 70% of district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that their teachers were well prepared to connect with all families and students about online learning. The lack of strong agreement, however, reflects the fact that district leaders were aware that most teachers felt overwhelmed by the immediate demands for remote learning, Zoom teaching, and responses to students with no computer at home.



About 85% of district leaders agreed that their schools were able to collect and grade students’ work. This is an important function for ensuring students that there are consequences for completing assignments online or in their paper packets. District leaders also reported that their

schools and teachers communicated successfully with families of children with special needs (91%), but less so with families who speak languages other than English at home (69%).

It is revealing and important that 77% of district leaders agreed or strongly agreed that teachers provided families and students with some fun and creative activities to supplement online classes and other schoolwork. As learning from home continued from month to month after March 2020, district leaders and teachers became increasingly aware that they needed to help students and families supplement online and other schoolwork with creative, athletic, dramatic, philanthropic, and other compelling and enjoyable activities.

District Correlates

Table 1 shows an interesting set of correlates drawn from the 2020 District *UPDATE* data. District leaders who more actively facilitated their schools’ ATPs (pre-COVID) conducted more activities to assist schools and teachers to meet COVID-19 challenges for organizing online instruction ($r = .645, p < .05$).³ Other analyses indicate that one of the strongest items in this measure was whether district leaders *provided teachers with resources on successful practices for students with no computer or internet at home*. This single item correlated with extent of district leaders’ facilitation of schools ($r = .728, p < .01$), indicating the importance of district leaders’ assistance to schools to help teachers meet the challenge of students who were unable to attend online classes.

District leaders who did more to facilitate school teams reported that their schools were more successful in organizing online instruction and in communicating with students’ families ($r = .529, p < .10$). This association was influenced most by district leaders’ reports that school ATPs were adding fun and creative activities to the assignments and resources for students to balance “schoolwork” online or in packets ($r = .523, p < .10$).

Table 1 reinforces the data in Figure 6 that district leaders believed that their schools’ ATPs and teachers were struggling to communicate with families who spoke languages other than English at home. In districts serving large percentages of multilingual families, leaders for partnerships reported that they were less able to assist teachers with remote instruction ($r = -.497, p < .10$), less able to connect with all families ($r = -.481, p < .10$), and they rated their schools as doing less in response to COVID-19 challenges ($r = -.521, p < .10$).

Table 1. Correlates of District Leaders’ Facilitation of School ATPs and Assistance to Schools and Families during COVID-19

District Measure	District Assisted School ATPs and Teachers during COVID-19	District Assisted Families during COVID-19	District Assessed Quality of Schools’ Responses to COVID-19 Challenges
Extent of District Leaders’ Facilitation of School ATPs	+.645*	NS--	+.529#
# different languages in district	-.497#	-.481#	-.521#

Source: 2020 DISTRICT *UPDATE*, N=15

Zero-order correlations: * $p < .05$, # $p < .10$, NS= Not significant

Note: The small size of the district sample encouraged attention to strong associations above .45, $p < .10$.

Although “correlation” is not “causation,” the data suggest that district leaders who actively facilitated school ATPs on partnership program development (pre-COVID) were more likely to support teachers’ online instruction (post-COVID) and more likely to report that schools responded positively to COVID-19 challenges. However, the data also point to the need for district leaders and school teams to give greater attention to the challenges of communicating with families who speak languages other than English at home.

Examples of District Best Practices, Challenges, and Next Steps during COVID-19 Crisis

Chart 1 Examples: DISTRICT Reports on Partnership Actions during COVID-19 Crisis
Part A. District Best Practices for Partnerships during COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Continued to have ATP meetings via Zoom. We checked deadlines and how we can support the ATP. Provided information on summer resources for students. Provided copies of paper packets of student assignments by grade level for teachers on district website, along with other instructional resources for student learning. Created a phone line for families with live technical support. Worked with community partners and philanthropies to provide families in need with Wi-Fi, hotspots, laptops, iPads, Chromebooks. Developed an E-Newsletter to engage all families and communicate information on district and community resources. Created with our partner, Communities in Schools, teams of educators to conduct regularly scheduled virtual home visits. Superintendent and principals offered on-line coffee chats for parents to discuss successes, questions, and concerns.
Part B. District Challenges to Partnerships during COVID-19
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Our main challenge was making sure families had the technology and internet resources at home to enable students to keep up with online learning. Some students are “absent.” They do not consistently log in to distance learning. Our ELL families speak over 50 different languages. It has been challenging to ensure ongoing two-way communications with them. Parents had difficulties using the many different technology platforms—e-mail, google drive, teacher apps, and others—and helping student with assigned work. Some families had equipment but did not know how to submit student work. So, students did not get credit for work done. Some parent lost their jobs and left the area without notifying the district.
Part C. Next Steps for Partnership Actions in the 20-21 School Year, if COVID-19 Continues
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We must make sure that that families are trained on how to use Chromebooks and Google Meet. Our schools will have virtual team meetings and virtual meetings and visits with parents (with phone or online). We need to remind school ATPs that children’s social and emotional well-being is as important as the student’s academic success. We will offer resources to assist families in supporting their child’s emotional health. Our office will host virtual ATP trainings to assist teams in planning activities for our "new normal." Because only students will be permitted to enter school buildings for face-to-face learning, we will plan some engagement activities to conduct outdoors and keep families connected and engaged. We will give more guidance to families to support their child’s schoolwork at home.

See more examples of district and organization best practices in *Promising Partnership Practices 2020*, at www.partnershipschoools.org in the section Success Stories.

District leaders for partnerships were asked to share specific partnership practices that they conducted to support partnerships during the COVID-19 closure in the 19-20 school year. They also listed one challenge that arose, and one “next step” that they and colleagues want to conduct to improve connections and communications if COVID-19 continues to impact their district, schools, families, and students. All district leaders (100%) contributed examples and ideas.

Panel 1 of Chart 1 summarizes representative best practices that district leaders for partnerships conducted after school doors closed in March 2020. The examples illustrate how districts and schools used various technologies to stay in touch with each other and to contact students and families. As noted above, the top priority after COVID closed school doors, was to organize the distribution of meals for students. Also, some districts worked with community partners to try to close the digital divide by providing computers for students who had none. Others created new connections to communicate with parents, such as establishing a dedicated phone line for parents’ questions, comments, and reactions.

Panel 2 lists a few typical challenges district leaders faced as they worked to improve family and community engagement. Most district leaders were troubled by the digital divide—students with and without computers and adequate internet access. Adequate technology became an imperative resource for students to join their teachers and classmates for daily lessons. The lack of technology caused many students to disengage—be absent--from school. The lack of technology also limited student learning, affected communications of teachers and parents, and weakened school, family, and community partnerships.

Panel 3 shows a few next steps that district leaders want to take if COVID-19 continues in the next school year. The activities are closely linked to the challenges identified, above, with heavy emphasis on correcting the inequities in technology for student learning and connecting with families. Some next steps aim to improve how educators, parents, and students check in with each other on a regular schedule to ensure student learning and well-being. District leaders also noted the need to do more to help parents support their children’s social and emotional development when schools are closed and students are deprived of daily connections with teachers and friends.

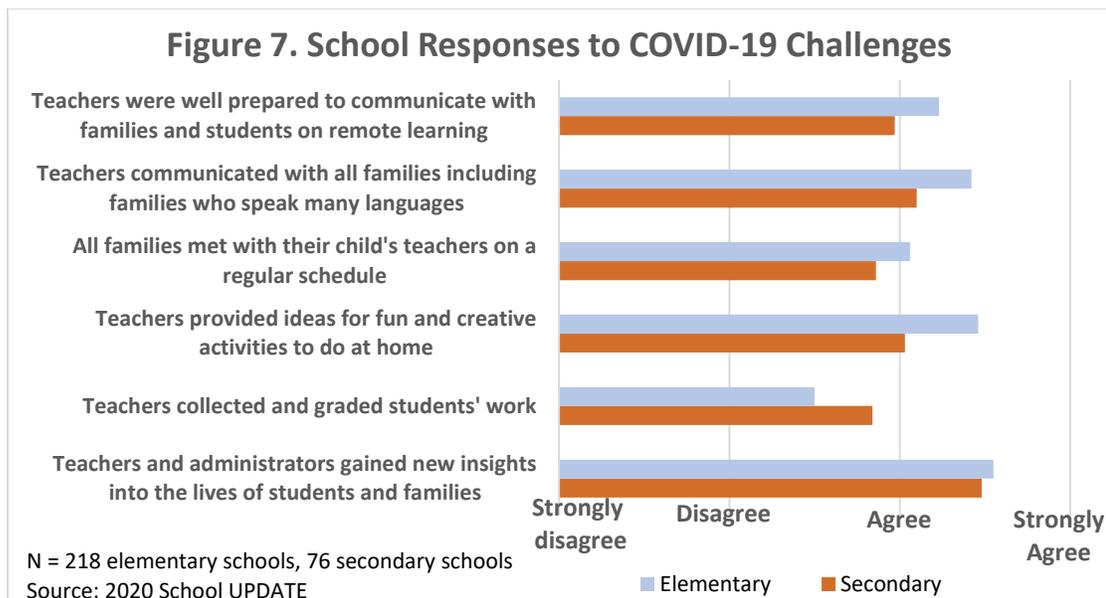
Solving COVID-19 challenges and taking next steps will not be easy. The fact that some district leaders have been able to move more quickly and more successfully in addressing COVID-19 challenges indicates that, with planning and partnerships, other district leaders will be able address the challenges they noted.

SCHOOL DATA

We asked school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) about how they responded to the challenges created by COVID-19 to continue instruction for students and communications with parents. We also asked ATPs about whether and how well their district leaders assisted them in meeting COVID-19 challenges.

School Responses to COVID-19 is an 11-item scale ($\alpha = .87$, scored 1-4 for strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) on specific actions to meet challenges when school doors closed. Figure 7 shows the mean scores for elementary and secondary schools on these items. Elementary schools’ average scores were higher than the average scores of secondary schools, indicating stronger agreement, for example, that teachers were better prepared to teach online and connect with families. In particular, ATPs in elementary schools were more likely to agree or strongly agree that

their teachers met with all families about their children’s learning from home (\bar{x} =3.06) compared with reports from secondary schools (\bar{x} =2.86).

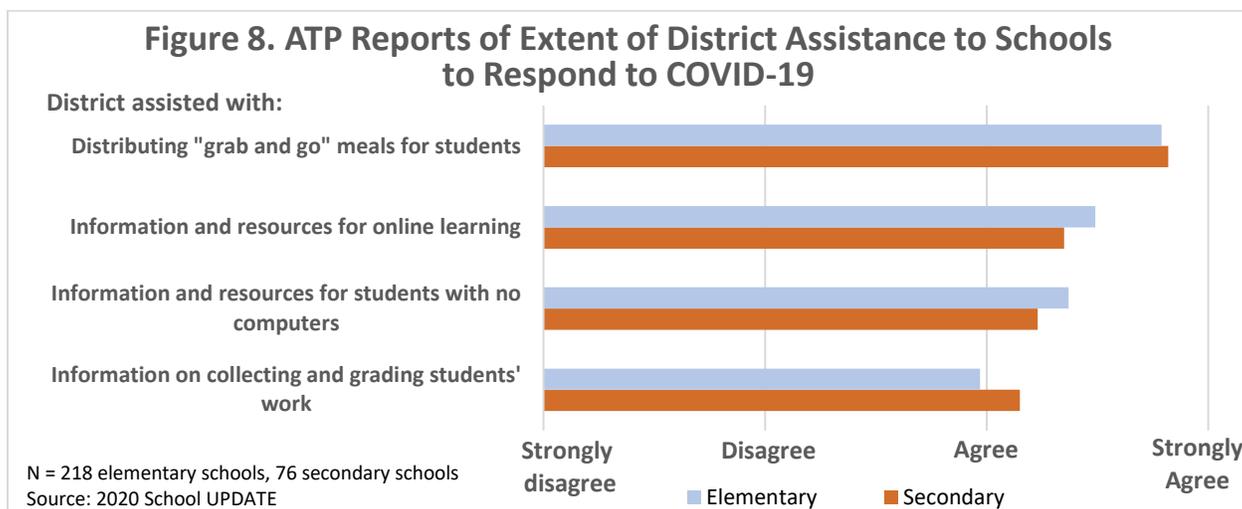


There is one exception to the pattern of more action by elementary schools to meet COVID challenges. Secondary schools agreed more strongly than did elementary schools that they collected and graded students’ work. This is particularly important at the high school level where students’ Grade Point Average (GPA) determines promotion and progress toward graduation from high school. See, too in Figure 8, that secondary school ATPs reported that they had more assistance from their district leaders on collecting and grading students’ work.

The highest average scores for both elementary and secondary school ATPs are reported for the item, “*Teachers and administrators gained new insights into the lives of students and their families.*” This is a positive result of school efforts to respond to the demands of COVID-19 and changes to teaching and communicating. ATPs’ understanding of the conditions and constraints of students and families may help improve partnership activities when school doors reopen.

ATP Reports of District Assistance is a 6-item scale ($\alpha = .83$, scored 1-4 for strongly disagree, disagree, agree, strongly agree) on how well school ATPs were guided by their district leaders to respond to COVID-19 challenges. Figure 8 reports the mean scores on important items. ATPs in both elementary ($\bar{x} = 3.8$) and secondary ($\bar{x} = 3.8$) schools agreed strongly that their districts helped organize the distribution of free meals (breakfast and lunch) to families for eligible students. Some districts and schools distributed meals daily, while others elected weekly distributions after families requested a more convenient schedule. Some made deliveries directly to families’ homes (e.g., via school bus routes) if parents did not have transportation to *Grab and Go* locations.

On other items, ATPs in elementary schools agreed more strongly than those in secondary schools that district leaders helped teachers with resources for online learning and for paper packets for students with no computers. The exception to this pattern, noted above, is that ATPs in secondary schools agreed more strongly that they received guidance about collecting and grading students work ($\bar{x} = 3.2$) more than did ATPs in elementary schools ($\bar{x} = 2.9$). Even with district guidance, most ATPs at all school levels reported that they needed to improve how they collect and grade students’ work if COVID-19 continues to require remote learning in the next school year.



School Correlates

Table 2 reports important correlates of partnership program qualities with actions taken by schools and assistance from district leaders. Panel 1 presents the correlates of school responses to COVID-19 challenges (full scale and selected items) with the quality of partnership programs, school level, and student poverty level. Panel II shows correlates of school ATPs reports of how much their districts assisted the school (full scale and selected items).

The quality of school partnership programs overall, extent of implementation, and strength of collegial support for partnerships (column 1) are significantly correlated with school responses to COVID-19 challenges. Specifically, Panel I shows that schools with higher quality partnership programs overall, stronger implementation activities, and collegial support for partnerships report taking more actions to connect with students and families about remote learning. For example, schools with stronger implementations of program activities (a pre-COVID indicator), reported more and better communications with students and families when school doors closed ($r = .379^{**}$). The overall relationship is particularly strong between strong program implementation and teachers' provision of fun and creative activities for students learning at home during COVID-19 in addition to their "regular" school assignments ($r = .383^{**}$). Strong partnership program implementation also was significantly correlated with ATP and teachers' communications with families speaking different languages at home ($r = .373^{**}$). Table 2 also shows that elementary schools did more than secondary schools to provide students with varied, creative learning activities than did secondary schools ($r = -.334^{**}$) and did significantly more to connect with multilingual families ($r = -.247^{**}$).

Panel II shows that schools with high quality partnership programs overall, stronger program implementations, and more collegial support for partnerships reported more assistance from their district leaders, including assistance with resources for online classes and for serving students with no computer or internet access at home. For example, schools with stronger program implementation reported more assistance from their district leaders with COVID challenges ($.252^{**}$). Schools with more collegial support for partnerships reported receiving more assistance from their district leader for partnerships ideas to meet COVID-19 challenges ($r = .355^{**}$). The correlates suggest how schools improve their partnership programs with a purposeful mix of goal-linked activities by ATPs, support from school colleagues, and useful assistance from district leaders for partnerships.

It is important to note that school percentages of students eligible for free or reduced-price meals were not significantly (NS) associated with school responses to COVID-19 challenges or to

their reports of assistance from their district leaders for partnerships. This tells us that teachers and ATPs in schools with few or many economically-stressed students and families worked in similar ways to try to keep students learning from home during the COVID crisis. The teachers’ good efforts, however, were affected by the digital divide and technology inequities, as discussed above.

Table 2. Correlates of SCHOOL ATP Partnership Program Qualities and Responses to COVID-19 Challenges

School Measure	I. ATP Connections with Students and Families			II. ATP Reports of District Assistance to School		
	School Connections with Students and Fams during COVID-19 (Scale)	Teachers Provided Fun and Creative Activities for Learning at Home (Item)	Teachers Connected with Families in Different Languages (Item)	District Assistance on COVID-19 Challenges (Scale)	District Help with Online Resources (Item)	District Help w Resources for Students with NO Computer (Item)
Overall Quality of School Partnership Program	.215**	.212**	.216**	.190*	.198*	.157*
Implementation Activities	.379**	.383**	.373**	.252**	.208**	.203**
Collegial Support at School	.358**	.316**	.269**	.355**	.245**	.344**
School Grade Level (Elem/Sec)	-.156*	-.334**	-.247**	NS	-.119*	NS
% Free or Reduced-Price Meals	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS	NS

Source: 2020 SCHOOL UPDATE, N=301
 Zero-order correlations: **p<.01, *p<.05, NS= Not Significant
 Note: Elementary Schools coded 1; Secondary Schools coded 2.

Examples of School ATPs’ Best Practices, Challenges, and Next Steps during COVID-19 Crisis

School ATPs shared a best practice that their school conducted to support partnerships during the COVID-19 closures, starting in March 2020. The teams also listed one challenge they faced in conducting partnerships, and one “next step” they hoped to conduct to improve connections and communications if COVID-19 continues in the 21-22 school year. Just about all 300 ATPs in the sample contributed examples and ideas.

Panel 1 of Chart 2 lists a few activities that worked well for school ATPs as they addressed challenges of COVID-19 closures. The examples include some creative approaches such as developing videos in multi-languages for students and parents about remote learning procedures, and having the principal ride the “lunch bus” each week to talk with families and students. Other examples include Jump Rope for Heart Health for student and family exercise; Virtual Trips Friday when students and families took online field trips to new and interesting places; and Virtual Show and Tell and Story Time. Some school ATPs and teachers organized art, science, music, baking, physical education, and other enriching activities for students and families to conduct at home.

School ATPs used many social media platforms to contact parents and students, hold meetings, and deliver resources (e.g., extra food, medicines, computers). Many ATPs and teachers concentrated on connecting with parents when their children were “absent” from online classes to learn if and how to help these students attend class every day.

Chart 2. Examples: SCHOOL ATP Reports on Partnership Actions during COVID-19 Crisis

Part A. SCHOOL ATP Best Practices for Partnerships during COVID-19

- Created videos on COVID-19 plans and resources for students and families at each grade level and in multiple languages.
- Enabled individual teachers to contact parents and respond when students and families experienced food insecurity or needed social, emotional, medical, technological or other support and services.
- Offered *Class Dojo* and 98% of families signed up. (Note: Schools listed many “preestablished” and new platforms to connect with families, including Facebook, Skype, Instagram, E-mail, Parent Portal, Google Voice, Google Hangout, school website, Microsoft Teams, Remind, Zoom, and others).
- Contacted parents whose children were not participating in online classes. (Note: Schools listed many who made these contacts: counselors, principals, teachers, parent leaders, on a regular schedule (e.g., some once a week, bi-weekly, through office hours, daily postings, scheduled Zoom meetings, etc.)
- Distributed computers (Chromebooks) to families in need immediately after schools closed. Helped them obtain internet access and assisted with distance learning.
- Set up a food pantry for families in need of additional food beyond Grab and Go lunches. Provided school supplies to all families.
- The principal rode the “lunch bus” every week to check in with families and students and make connections
- Created parent groups led by the district Family Engagement Coordinator that met 2x a month to discuss successes and challenges during the school closure. This gave families a place and a voice.

Part B. District Challenges to Partnerships during COVID-19

- Teachers and students were not prepared for the abrupt change
- Difficult for teachers who did not speak a language other than English to connect with multi-lingual families.
- Teachers could not connect with families who changed their phone numbers. Some did not answer phone. Some moved but left no contact information.
- There were too many different communication platforms, schedules, and strategies to access learning and parent-teacher communications.
- Our challenge was two-fold: 1) Teachers were not uniformly technologically equipped to successfully engage ALL students in online learning; and 2) Many teachers were hesitant to use their personal phones to call families. Also 95% of our families did not provide an e-mail address. We could not communicate.
- Families were overwhelmed with all aspects of remote learning, especially if they had more than one child and not enough devices. They had problems with technologies, online instruction, meetings with teachers, keeping up with e-mails and Zoom meetings, and were affected by family real-life situations (e.g., illness, family schedules, anxieties).
- Some students and families did not participate, did not have a computer or Internet access. Special problems in rural areas. Some just “gave up” and did not hand in learning packets. Especially toward the end of the school year.
- Some families needed special services, but we had no way to know.
- Many of our students' parents are essential workers. Some students were left at home with older siblings, babysitters or relatives. It was hard for these students to focus and have regular online access to daily lessons.

Part C. Next Steps for Partnership Actions in the 21-22 School Year, if COVID-19 Continues

- Our biggest next step will be to correct students' learning deficits.
- We will study and select (1) workable ways for students to return to school in person, with proper safety protocols; (2) ensure full student attendance,
- We will update and make sure all phone numbers and contacts are current and up-to-date.
- We need to streamline and standardize communication platform/s with families.
- We must ensure that families have digital devices and resources they need for online learning, and know how to use them if school closes again.
- We need to survey families about what worked best for them during closure and how we can assist best if remote learning continues.
- We must provide Technology-101 lessons for parents and monthly meetings for parents with questions
- We will work with our feeder schools on partnership communications with parents of students leaving one school and entering another.
- We will convert our ATP activities into virtual models of family engagement (i.e. virtual student of the month assemblies, virtual school health week) to replace activities at school and enable more families to attend.
- We need to be prepared with flexible plans for the ATP and for teachers' instruction in case there is another shutdown. We cannot know what is ahead concerning COVID-19.

See more examples of schools' best practices in *Promising Partnership Practices 2020* (Thomas, Bostic, & Epstein, 2020) at www.partnershipschoools.org in the section Success Stories.

Panel 2 lists a few typical challenges that ATPs addressed as they worked to improve family and community engagement during the COVID closures. Like their district leaders, most ATPs were seriously challenged by the digital divide—the lack of computers and internet access—that prevented some students from attending online classes. ATPs were honest about the lack of advanced notice of the COVID closures, and their need to have more and better training to conduct remote learning effectively with all students—with and without computers and with all families regardless of language spoken at home. Immediately, educators began to use Zoom and other platforms for their lessons, meetings, and discussions, and learned that they needed to find ways to use these resources more effectively.

Panel 3 shares a few next steps that ATPs want to take to improve remote learning and connections with families, whether schools continue remote learning or school doors open in the next school year. One team expressed this well, “*Our biggest next step will be to correct students’ learning deficits.*” All educators are concerned about identifying and erasing any learning losses that students experienced due to remote learning and irregular school attendance.

Most next steps are linked to the challenges identified in Panel 2, especially the need to correct inequities among students of available computers and internet access. Other frequently mentioned next steps concern more effective use Zoom and other platforms for meetings of teams, meetings with parents and students, and other remote teaching tools. Several ATPs noted the need to do more to provide children with support for their social and emotional development, as students were summarily deprived of daily connections with teachers and friends. Some ATPs recognized that teachers must make flexible and multiple plans for the lessons they will teach at school and/or at home, as COVID-19 will continue to determine whether students are learning in school, from home, or in a mix of locations.

CONCLUSIONS

The 2020 *UPDATE* data show that in response to the unprecedented challenges of school closures due to COVID-19, NNPS district leaders for partnerships and school-based Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs) worked hard to connect and communicate with students and families. COVID challenges required new approaches to instruction and partnerships. Some strategies succeeded, some failed, and some “silver linings” emerged that may help to improve instruction and partnerships in the future.⁴

Meals Came First. Prior to COVID-19 school closures, districts and schools understood that many children and families depend on them for basic needs such as food, warm winter clothes, and health services. These needs became even more pressing in many locations during the COVID crisis. Districts and schools knew that the first and most important action was to organize the distribution of free meals to eligible students who relied on breakfasts and lunches at school. Every district and all schools reported their efforts, revisions, and successes in establishing this essential service when school doors closed. Whether they distributed meals every day, once a week, or delivered meals to students’ homes, educators knew that students relied on school meals for good nutrition every day.

The Digital Divide was Pervasive. The clearest inequality with the greatest implications for student learning identified by all districts and schools was the digital divide—some students with and some without computers and adequate internet access at home. This discrepancy was known prior to COVID-19, but became critical for online learning, and left those without computers unable to attend online classes with teachers and friends

Teachers created paper packets of assignments for students with no computers. However, the two instructional approaches—online learning and paper packets—are not equivalent in quality of lessons or learning. Some community partners and philanthropies assisted districts and schools to address this challenge by providing Chromebooks, free subscriptions for internet service, and community hot spots for some students and families. But large percentages of students and families remain disconnected. The digital divide is real and destructive. It expands the learning and opportunity gaps in schools and society, and needs to be *the* top priority as a “next step” for districts and schools whether school doors are open or closed.

In addition to these common results reported by all district leaders and all school teams, the 2020 *UPDATE* data revealed several important responses to COVID-19 challenges.

Hard Work. District leaders, school teams, families, and students pivoted in mid-March to meet COVID-19 challenges to student learning. They worked in extraordinary ways to work as partners in education. NNPS identified teachers, parents, and students as *the* largest group of *essential workers* of the COVID period (Epstein, 2020). Along with the critical work of health professionals whose lives were on the line in treating COVID-19 patients, teachers and administrators in about 100,000 schools and families of about 50 million students were required to work together every day for the education and well-being of all students. In NNPS, the agenda for good partnerships, welcoming schools, and successful students took on new meanings. The data indicated that, by and large, schools and families performed near-miracles to reimagine “education” with new technologies and, in some cases, with no new technologies at a scale that has never been considered before.

Mutual Appreciation. Due to COVID-19, partners in education—parents, teachers, administrators, and students—grew to appreciate each other more than ever before. The 2020 *UPDATE* data showed that nearly 100% of district leaders and school teams agreed that they “gained insights” into their students’ lives and families’ situations not known before. They also recognized that decisions about opening schools required attention to the health and safety of students, teachers, and the members of families living at home.

Decisions about when to open school doors and whether to offer in-person, hybrid, or remote learning in the 20-21 school year, are being made by district leaders with input from families, teachers, health professionals, and other community leaders. Student attendance will be made by educators and parents working together. Given the high stakes of education during a global pandemic, the decisions about how and when to reopen schools will require all stakeholders and constituents to consider each other’s views and concerns about student, family, and teacher prior health conditions, family situations and student needs. As more schools open for student attendance, educators will continue to grapple with how to make sure that schools are clean, with adequate social distancing in classrooms, labs, and cafeterias. They will plan for adequate substitute teachers and other logistics. The level of mutual respect and appreciation for the roles that educators and families play in children’s education and development has never been higher, due to responses to the challenges imposed by COVID-19.

Silver Linings. From the storm clouds of COVID-19, some silver linings emerged that may help improve school, family, and community partnership programs and practices in the future.

Advancing technology. COVID-19 required teachers to conduct online classes for students and expand communications with all parents. Prior to March 2020, some teachers used Facebook, Twitter, Remind, and other platforms to connect with parents. Some assigned students project that

were completed on computers, smart phones, and other “new” platforms. After March 2020, just about all teachers, district leaders, and parents learned new skills and increased their comfort-levels with online connections for classes for students, meetings with parents, 2-way communications, and other partnership activities. These new connections and experiences are likely to continue to enrich and improve school and family partnerships whether schools are open or closed.

Fewer partnership “events” at the school building. The new technologies for meetings and messages, noted above, changed the design and content of school and family partnerships. Prior to COVID-19, districts and schools tended to over-emphasize partnership *events* at the school building. The goal for events is to welcome many families, build school spirit, and help parents and teachers meet each other. There always will be a place for well-designed and well-implemented events that educators, families, and students enjoy together at school. These include open houses, reading nights, math explorations, science days, book fairs, multicultural celebrations, and other excellent practices. COVID-19 required new designs and new connections focused on teacher and parent meetings, family engagement with student learning, and enjoyable activities conducted at home or in new locations (e.g., driveways, parking lots, drive-in movie lots, etc.).

In the past, some parents could not attend events at the school building due to lack of transportation, parent employment schedules, other family responsibilities, parent health problems, and other reasons. With new and creative designs of family engagement activities using varied technologies, many parents who were not engaged prior to COVID-19 will be able to participate in family engagement meetings and activities. This is predicated on the assumption that educators will incorporate what they have learned during the months of school closures.

Reaching ALL parents. Just about all districts and schools have policies and strategic plans that state—in so many words—that education is a shared responsibility of school, home, and community, and that educators will connect with *all* families in ways that support student learning and development. In the past, these common sentences were aspirational goals that could be attained incrementally if districts and schools organized leadership, teamwork, plans, and evaluations as guided by NNPS. COVID-19 required educators to reach out to *all* parents *because* their children were learning from home. Teachers and parents connected, first, to ensure the distribution of free meals that students received every day at school. Then, educators and parents designed new ways to communicate using high-tech and low-tech about children’s attendance in class, how work would be collected and graded, children’s well-being, health and education services needed by families, and more. In many places and in different ways, educators actually connected successfully with *all* families. The examples demonstrate that the goal to engage all families is, in fact, attainable.

Looking ahead. With ongoing effort and with some luck, educators, families, students, and NNPS will look back at the COVID-19 school closures as “time-past.” The 2020 *UPDATE* data from districts and schools documented the hard work conducted by educators, families, and students to keep students learning from home. The data also identified critical inequalities that must be corrected. COVID-19 made school, family, and community partnerships the top priority in every district and every school for student success at every grade level. The knowledge and skills gained because of the demands of COVID-19 will continue to strengthen programs of school, family, and community partnerships when school doors open.

NOTES

- 1) In 2020, data are from NNPS districts in 8 states: AR, CA, ID, IL, LA, SC, VT, and WA. Data are from NNPS schools in 10 states: AR, CA, CT, FL, LA, OH, MI, PA, SC, and WA.
- 2) The *internal reliability* (α or alpha) of a scale indicates whether the items represent a common construct. Reliability coefficients of .6 or higher indicate that the items are related and that the scale is useful
- 3) (r) refers to a correlation coefficient that reports the strength of relationships between two variables.
- 4) States and organizations in NNPS also completed 2020 *UPDATE* evaluations. We examine these data, but the samples are small and agendas are too varied to analyze aggregated data.

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HOW TO USE THIS REPORT

Review each section of this report and reflect on how *your* program compares with reports from districts and schools across the country.

- Discuss with your colleagues and school teams:
What are we doing well now? What can we improve in the next school year?
What advice or professional development from NNPS would help us meet our goals?
- District leaders should review your *Leadership Plan for Partnerships*. School ATPs should review your *One-Year Action Plan for Partnerships* for the rest of this year and update these plans for the 21-22 school year. Retain good practices and consider needed improvements.
- District leaders who guide 8 schools or more in NNPS that completed the 2020 School *UPDATE*, will receive a *customized report* from NNPS on your schools' data in the next week or so. You will be able to compare your schools' data with the figures in this report on partnerships during the COVID-19 crisis. Discuss the patterns that are important in your location.
- Share this document with your colleagues and supervisors to show that you are working with NNPS to evaluate your work and progress every year. Click on Research and Evaluation for downloadable copies of this report.
- Contact NNPS with questions about this report or your next steps to improve district-level and school-based partnership programs.

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT FROM NNPS

Members of NNPS have many options for professional development to continually improve their programs of school, family, and community partnerships.

- **Visit the NNPS website:** www.partnershipschools.org.
- Read the monthly NNPS *E-Brief* for news and ideas. Use information from the *E-Brief* in your own communications with school-based ATPs.
Make sure your IT office allows *E-Brief* and other e-mail from NNPS, Johns Hopkins University, and from Constant Contact that disseminates *E-Brief for NNPS*.
- District, organization, and state leaders may register for an NNPS Leadership Institute in March or October. The next one is:
 - ✓ **Spring, Online Leadership Institute – March 18, 19, 26, 2021** – for district, organization, and state leaders who are new to NNPS or who are ready to conduct *One-Day Team Training* workshops with their schools’ Action Teams for Partnerships (ATPs). To register, follow the links from the home page, www.partnershipschools.org.
- Find good ideas in the NNPS annual books of *Promising Partnership Practices* on the website in the section *Success Stories*.⁷
- Follow NNPS on *Facebook* and *Twitter* for photos, notes, and newsletters from NNPS Institutes and from district and school members. “LIKE” NNPS on **Facebook** at: <https://www.facebook.com/partnershipschools> and follow us on **Twitter** at: https://twitter.com/NNPS_JHU.
- Scaling up? Ask the next set of schools to complete the *NNPS School Membership Form*. See the section Join NNPS at www.partnershipschools.org.
- E-mail NNPS Facilitator—Brenda Thomas, bthomas@jhu.edu, with YOUR questions about next steps at the district level to strengthen your program and assist your schools.
- Want on-site or online professional development? Contract with NNPS for keynote addresses, presentations, and workshops to support your work and to prepare your schools’ ATPs. Contact us by email for more information.



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